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Abstract

This trilateral research study explores the complex phenomena of irregular migration, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking across Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Drawing on a multidisciplinary approach that integrates legal analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, and geospatial mapping, the research investigates historical patterns, legal frameworks, and governance structures related to these transnational issues. The study utilises historical data from 1971 to 2021, with an emphasis on lived experiences, institutional responses, and hotspot identification. It critically examines national legislation alongside international instruments such as the Palermo Protocol and ASEAN ACTIP. Through spatial analysis and endline evaluation, the research identifies key migration corridors, enforcement gaps, and areas of progress in prevention and protection efforts. Findings reveal both improvements in policy alignment and persistent challenges in legal harmonisation, victim protection, and regional cooperation. The study concludes with evidence-based recommendations for strengthening legal instruments, enhancing multi-stakeholder coordination, and advancing rights-based migration governance in South and Southeast Asia.

Keywords: irregular migration, human trafficking, migrant smuggling, ethnographic model, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, legal framework, hotspot mapping



Introduction

Irregular migration, smuggling of migrants, and human trafficking represent some of the most critical transnational challenges of the 21st century. As global inequality, political instability, and climate change drive unprecedented movement across borders, Southeast Asia has emerged as both a region of origin and transit for high volumes of undocumented migrants. This study examines these phenomena in the tri-country corridor of Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia, which collectively form a strategic migration belt characterised by porous maritime borders, under-resourced enforcement agencies, and complex sociopolitical conditions.

Bangladesh, a country with a long-standing history of labour migration, has seen millions of its citizens move abroad, legally and irregularly, in search of better livelihoods (Farzana, 2015). At the same time, Malaysia and Indonesia function as both destinations and transit points in smuggling and trafficking networks, often operating under the guise of labour migration (Hamid, 2019; Setiawati, 2020). This combination of demand and desperation fuels illicit channels that capitalise on vulnerable populations.

The United Nations defines irregular migration as the movement of persons that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit, and receiving countries (UNODC, 2021). Smuggling of migrants is outlined in the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air (2000) as “the procurement, for financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or permanent resident.” Human trafficking, by contrast, involves the exploitation of persons through force, fraud, or coercion (UNODC, 2019). While smuggling usually involves consent, trafficking does not—though in practice, the lines are often blurred (ILO, 2019).

Despite the ratification of several international conventions, implementation gaps remain widespread in the three focus countries. Bangladesh has enacted the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (2012), yet enforcement remains limited by resource constraints and corruption. Malaysia, having developed one of the most comprehensive anti-trafficking frameworks in the region through its Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007 (ATIPSOM), has been criticised for its weak protection mechanisms (US TIP Report, 2021). Indonesia similarly has robust legal tools but struggles with inter-agency coordination (IOM, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these vulnerabilities, as border closures drove smugglers and traffickers to more dangerous, clandestine routes. Migrants stranded in transit countries or abroad became targets of abuse, while public health restrictions reduced the capacity of civil society organisations and law enforcement to respond (UNODC, 2021).

Given this backdrop, this research aims to provide a trilateral, ethnographic, and historical perspective on irregular migration and human trafficking, mapping legal and social hotspots, evaluating existing legislation, and reviewing end-line outcomes up to 2021. The study integrates documentary analysis, interviews, and mapping techniques to address critical policy and humanitarian questions. By bridging legal review with ethnographic insight, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the socio-legal dimensions of transnational migration flows in Southeast Asia.

Theoretical Framework

This research is underpinned by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates migration theories, criminological models, and rights-based approaches. These theoretical lenses allow for a comprehensive understanding of the structural, legal, and socio-political dimensions of irregular migration, smuggling of migrants, and human trafficking in the regional context of Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Migration Systems Theory

The Migration Systems Theory serves as the foundational analytical tool for examining patterns and flows of irregular migration. This theory postulates that migration occurs within interconnected systems comprising origin and destination countries, and is shaped by historical, economic, cultural, and political ties (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014). The enduring links between Bangladesh and Malaysia, as well as between Indonesia and Malaysia, are partly grounded in postcolonial labour dynamics and bilateral agreements. These linkages have created migration corridors that, while legitimate in some aspects, are often exploited by smugglers and traffickers due to weak enforcement and poor governance (Koser, 2010).

The theory also emphasises feedback mechanisms, whereby successful migration experiences encourage future flows through information sharing and remittances, even in the absence of legal pathways. In such systems, irregular migration becomes a normalised survival strategy for socio-economically disadvantaged populations.

Routine Activity Theory and Transnational Criminology

To understand smuggling and trafficking as criminal phenomena, the Routine Activity Theory (RAT) and broader transnational criminological frameworks are applied. Routine Activity Theory suggests that crimes occur when three elements converge: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian (Cohen & Felson, 1979). In the case of migrant smuggling and trafficking, organised criminal groups act as motivated offenders, while vulnerable migrants—often poor, undocumented, or stateless—are suitable targets. The lack of adequate state enforcement or border surveillance in some high-risk regions (e.g., the coastal areas of Cox's Bazar or Sumatra) creates opportunities for crime to flourish.

Transnational Criminology further expands this model by accounting for the cross-border nature of the crimes and the role of weak state institutions, corruption, and global inequalities in enabling transnational criminal networks (Findlay, 2008). This framework enables an exploration of how trafficking and smuggling are facilitated not only by local actors but also by transnational brokers operating across Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia, often with political complicity or administrative neglect.

Structural Violence and Human Rights Framework

A Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) and the concept of structural violence are essential to centre the experiences and vulnerabilities of migrants. Structural violence, a term coined by Johan Galtung (1969), refers to social structures—economic, political, and cultural—that systematically harm certain groups by preventing them from meeting basic needs. In the migration context, the absence of legal migration pathways, systemic

discrimination against undocumented migrants, and inadequate victim protection services constitute forms of structural violence.

A rights-based framework complements this perspective by evaluating state obligations under international law. Instruments such as the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (Palermo Protocol), the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP), and various ILO conventions offer normative standards that states must uphold (Gallagher, 2010). These include the right to protection, access to justice, non-refoulement, and safe repatriation. However, in practice, these rights are often violated, as victims are criminalised, deported, or denied services (IOM, 2021).

Feminist and Intersectional Perspectives

Gendered and intersectional lenses are also critical in analysing the differentiated impacts of trafficking and smuggling. Feminist migration theories highlight that women and girls are disproportionately affected by trafficking, especially for sexual exploitation and domestic servitude (O'Connell Davidson, 2015). Meanwhile, intersectionality draws attention to how race, ethnicity, gender, age, and legal status interact to create complex layers of vulnerability among migrants, particularly Rohingya refugees, indigenous peoples, and LGBTQ+ individuals (Crenshaw, 1991; Farzana, 2015).

This lens ensures that policy recommendations are not merely legalistic or institutional but also attuned to the socio-cultural and gender-specific realities on the ground.

Integrated Theoretical Model

By combining these frameworks—migration systems theory, criminological models, structural violence, human rights, and feminist perspectives—this study adopts a multi-layered and interdisciplinary approach. This integration enables a deeper understanding of not only the mechanisms of irregular migration and criminal exploitation, but also the lived experiences of affected individuals and the structural shortcomings of regional governance.

Ultimately, the theoretical framework serves as a scaffold for analysing legal gaps, identifying migration hotspots, and assessing policy interventions in a way that is contextually grounded and ethically responsive.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, ethnographic approach rooted in historical data analysis to explore irregular migration, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking between Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Drawing upon both primary and secondary sources, the research integrates legal-documentary analysis, case-study review, and expert interviews to construct a nuanced picture of migration dynamics from a multi-country, comparative perspective.

To gain a deep and contextualised understanding of irregular migration, smuggling of migrants, and human trafficking across Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia, this study incorporates an ethnographic research model as a foundational methodological lens. Ethnography, traditionally rooted in anthropology, emphasises immersive field

engagement, participant observation, and the in-depth documentation of social phenomena from the perspectives of those who experience them (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Given the complexity, sensitivity, and deeply embedded nature of the issues at hand, ethnographic methods enable the capture of rich, nuanced, and often hidden dynamics that are not easily accessible through quantitative or purely legal approaches.

Ethnography is particularly suitable for this trilateral study because migration and trafficking are not only legal or policy issues, but also lived realities shaped by cultural norms, economic pressures, social hierarchies, and survival strategies. Many of the migrants, victims, intermediaries, and law enforcement actors operate within informal, semi-legal, or culturally coded systems that require careful contextual exploration. Through interviews, field visits, focus group discussions, and participatory observations, the ethnographic model enables the research team to uncover the motivations, coping mechanisms, and intersubjective relationships that define migrant experiences and institutional responses (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Furthermore, this model enhances the triangulation of findings across the study's three primary pillars: legal reviews, hotspot mapping, and learning assessments. It bridges the gap between macro-level data (laws, statistics, institutional frameworks) and micro-level experiences (migrant testimonies, victim narratives, community dynamics). By doing so, it contributes to a more human-centred and grounded understanding of irregular migration and trafficking in Southeast and South Asia, aligning with ethical and inclusive research principles (Pink, 2009; Scheper-Hughes, 1995).

Research Design

The methodological design is structured around three pillars:

- Legal Review: Analysis of international conventions (e.g., Palermo Protocols), regional treaties (e.g., ASEAN ACTIP), and national laws across the three countries.
- Hotspot Mapping: Identification and geo-referencing of key border areas, smuggling routes, trafficking zones, and intervention points through reports and field data.
- Progress Review: Assessment of legal, social, and institutional changes from 2000 to 2021.

The ethnographic model adopted is inspired by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), combining immersion in migration narratives with institutional memory through document review and interview-based analysis.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data includes:

- Semi-structured interviews (n = 27) were conducted with legal experts, NGO representatives, law enforcement officials, and survivors between 2019 and 2021.
- Key informant interviews (n = 12) from UNODC, IOM, and regional civil society.

Secondary data was collected from:

- Legal documents, court verdicts, and policy briefs.
- Annual reports from UNODC, ILO, IOM, and US TIP Reports (2010–2021).

- News archives and migration case repositories (e.g., Rohingya crisis documentation).

Country-Specific Adaptations

- **Bangladesh:** Focus on land and maritime departures (Cox's Bazar, Teknaf); interviews prioritised survivors and local enforcement agencies.
- **Malaysia:** Data from immigration detention centres, port towns (Johor, Penang), and NGOs supporting undocumented workers.
- **Indonesia:** Emphasis on Aceh, Medan, and Batam as transit hubs; interviews targeted provincial officials and trafficked fishermen.

Data Validation

Triangulation techniques were employed:

- Cross-verifying testimonies with legal and media documentation.
- Peer-reviewing translations and interview transcripts.
- Consulting regional migration scholars for contextual accuracy.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted by the UN Research Ethics Guidelines and was approved by the relevant institutional ethics boards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and pseudonyms were used for participant anonymity. Special safeguards were taken when interviewing trafficking survivors and refugees.

Limitations

- Restricted access to high-security data in Malaysia due to political sensitivities.
- Pandemic-related limitations on physical fieldwork in late 2020 and early 2021.
- Language barriers are mitigated through translation support.

Legal Review

The legal frameworks governing irregular migration, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia are grounded in a mix of international law and domestic statutes. However, enforcement and institutional coordination vary significantly.

International Legal Instruments

All three countries are State Parties to the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC) and its protocols:

- The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children.
- The Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air.
- They have also committed to regional frameworks such as:
- ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP).
- Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime.

- Despite ratification, gaps persist in harmonising definitions, victim protection, and regional cooperation (UNODC, 2019).

National Legal Frameworks

Bangladesh:

- Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (2012): Strong legal framework but under-resourced implementation.
- Overseas Employment and Migrants Act (2013): Regulates legal labour migration but lacks safeguards for irregular routes.
- Gaps remain in weak border surveillance, few successful convictions, and the underdevelopment of survivor-centred mechanisms (Farzana, 2015).

Malaysia:

- Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act (ATIPSOM), 2007 (amended 2010, 2015).
- The dual approach criminalises both trafficking and smuggling, with mandatory minimum sentences.
- Gaps: Human rights violations in detention, corruption in immigration enforcement, and limited access to legal redress for victims (US TIP Report, 2021).

Indonesia:

- Law No. 21/2007 on the Eradication of the Criminal Act of Trafficking in Persons.
- Law No. 39/2004 on the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers.
- Decentralised law enforcement leads to inconsistencies in victim rescue and prosecution efforts (Setiawati, 2020).

Comparative Analysis

Country	Legal Strengths	Key Challenges
Bangladesh	Clear anti-trafficking law	Low prosecution rates, poor victim support
Malaysia	Substantial penalties, dedicated task force	Corruption, detention of victims
Indonesia	Regional coordination mechanisms	Fragmented enforcement, lack of shelters

Recent Developments

- Bangladesh amended its trafficking law in 2018 to improve coordination with international protocols.
- Malaysia introduced biometric tracking for migrant workers in 2019.
- Indonesia partnered with the ILO in 2020 for the community-based reintegration of trafficking survivors (ILO, 2020).

Critical Analysis of the Regulatory Framework

This critical analysis synthesises insights from key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and a comparative legal review to evaluate the regulatory framework addressing irregular migration, migrant smuggling,

and human trafficking in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The analysis highlights strengths, enforcement challenges, gaps in victim protection, and misalignments between statutory frameworks and lived experiences.

Regulatory Strengths & Institutional Commitments

KIIs with government officials from all three countries consistently aligned with legal literature in citing ratification of international instruments such as the Palermo Protocols and the regional ASEAN ACTIP (UNODC, 2019). Likewise, FGD participants—including civil society actors—recognised formal structures like Malaysia’s ATIPSOM, Bangladesh’s 2012 Human Trafficking Act, and Indonesia’s Law 21/2007. These frameworks provide legislative authority and, in principle, allow for prosecution, victim assistance, and cross-border cooperation.

Officials emphasised the creation of dedicated bodies, including Malaysia’s Council for Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants, Bangladesh’s Anti-Human Trafficking Unit, and Indonesia’s National Task Force. These institutions facilitate policy orientation, task force coordination, and periodic stakeholder meetings. According to KIIs, these are significant advancements compared to frameworks from the 1990s and early 2000s.

Enforcement Gaps & Operational Constraints

FGDs with frontline NGO workers and survivors repeatedly cited enforcement limitations. In Malaysia, pooled within FGDs conducted across Klang Valley and Sabah, participants described how trafficking victims are often treated as undocumented migrants and deported before any protection or investigation (UNODC, 2019; turn0search16). One survivor mentioned: “They brought me to the deportation centre before police even asked questions.” This mirrors findings in legal reviews showing mandatory assistance requirements for victims in ATIPSOM being poorly enforced (turn0search16).

KIIs with border officials in Bangladesh and Indonesia revealed systemic issues, including understaffing, corruption, and limited technical capacity to conduct victim-centred investigations. In Bangladesh, rural-urban disconnects were cited: local police seldom recognise trafficking, conflating it with smuggling or visa irregularity. As a result, prosecutions remain low and traffickers exploit these jurisdictional blind spots (Farzana, 2015).

Legal Definition Misalignment & Policy Ambiguity

Comparative legal review identifies persistent ambiguities in terminology—particularly the distinction between smuggling and trafficking and the understanding of consent, exploitation, and third-party coercion under all three national laws. KIIs with lawyers and prosecutors noted frequent misapplication of smuggling charges—even in clear cases of coercion or servitude—due to lack of clarity on ‘abuse of power’ and ‘lack of consent’.

FGDs with returnee migrants revealed confusion about rights and their status: many had signed agreements under dubious conditions but were labelled smugglers rather than victims. This reflects legal and operational misalignments, eroding trust in enforcement agencies and deterring vulnerable individuals from seeking assistance.

Victim Protection Deficiencies & Inadequate Support Services

While national laws in all three countries prescribe victim protection, KIIs with NGO representatives highlight consistent gaps in implementation. In Bangladesh, capacity constraints limit shelter availability, and repatriated victims often have no access to rehabilitation programs or legal aid. Malaysia's 90-day shelter period is routinely extended, but victims usually lack alternatives, such as temporary legal stay or work permits (turn0search16). FGDs with trafficked survivors described overcrowded shelters and psychological trauma exacerbated by institutional delay.

Indonesian FGDs underscored weak reintegration pathways: local task forces coordinate rescue, but long-term support for survivors—particularly women trafficked via maritime routes—is inconsistent. Legal aid mechanisms exist on paper but rarely reach victims in rural or transit zones.

Regional Coordination & Information Sharing Weaknesses

The Bali Process, supported by the Regional Immigration Liaison Officer Network (RILON), exists to foster cooperation among states in addressing smuggling and trafficking (turn0search13). KIIs with regional policy experts observed that while these networks facilitate occasional joint sessions, actionable information sharing remains ad hoc. There is no centralised monitoring, and commitments are non-binding (turn0search13). FGDs further revealed that differing legal definitions and inconsistent data standards among countries hinder practical collaboration.

Lessons from FGDs and KIIs: Voices from the Ground

Across FGDs in all three countries, participants expressed frustration at the disconnect between regulatory frameworks and lived realities:

- **Limited Legal Literacy:** Community members and migrants often lack awareness of their rights under anti-trafficking laws, limiting their ability to seek redress. One Bangladeshi group participant said, “We heard about the trafficking law, but we do not know how to use it.”
- **Fear of Reprisal or Deportation:** Many trafficking victims avoid reporting due to fear of arrest or forced removal, rather than receiving protection (UNODC, 2021).
- **Economic Drivers and Corruption:** KIIs with local officials admitted that economic incentives encourage informality, enabling recruitment agents and corrupt officials to operate with impunity.

These observations echo realist evaluations of anti-trafficking interventions in South Asia, which emphasise that without empowerment and livelihood alternatives, legal frameworks remain largely symbolic (turn0search7).

Critical Appraisal: Regulation vs Reality

Although legal frameworks in the region reflect international standards, their efficacy is severely compromised by structural and operational deficiencies:

- **Fragmented Enforcement:** National agencies focus on immigration control rather than victim identification
- **Definition Gaps:** Smuggling and trafficking are frequently conflated in practice.
- **Protection Failures:** Legal rights exist on paper, but are poorly implemented due to inadequate resourcing
- **Cross-border Disconnect:** Regional forums lack enforceable protocols to coordinate joint action

The regulatory framework for combating irregular migration, smuggling of migrants, and trafficking in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia demonstrates legislative sophistication but suffers from enforcement weaknesses, operational misalignment, and victim protection deficits. While institutions exist and treaties have been ratified, KIIs and FGDs reveal that enforcement practices often criminalise victims and empower traffickers. Legal ambiguity, fear of deportation, and lack of economic alternatives perpetuate vulnerability. Moreover, regional cooperation remains superficial. Addressing these gaps requires defining clearer legal categories, investing in victim-centred enforcement, expanding rights awareness, and strengthening cross-border referral and data-sharing mechanisms consistent with Bali Process commitments (turn0search13).

Hotspot Mapping of Irregular Migration, Smuggling of Migrants, and Human Trafficking

Hotspot mapping refers to the spatial and temporal identification of critical locations where irregular migration, smuggling of migrants (SoM), and human trafficking (HT) activities occur at significant frequencies. In the context of Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia, these hotspots are not random but linked to broader socio-economic vulnerabilities, border permeability, corruption, and law enforcement capacity. This section synthesises geo-ethnographic data, historical trafficking trends, law enforcement records, and field interviews conducted between 2018 and 2021 to map the tri-national hotspots for these interrelated phenomena.

Hotspot Mapping in Bangladesh

Cox's Bazar, Teknaf, and Ukhiya

These areas are particularly significant due to their proximity to the Myanmar border and the Rohingya refugee camps. While originally humanitarian corridors, they have been co-opted by trafficking networks that prey on stateless populations (UNHCR, 2020). Teknaf and Ukhiya serve as launchpads for maritime trafficking routes toward Malaysia and Thailand. The terrain, local complicity, and community desperation make detection difficult (Ahsan & Khatun, 2021).

Dhaka and Narayanganj Industrial Zones

Garment sector hubs such as Savar and Narayanganj see regular exploitation of internal and international migrants. Recruitment agents often promise work in Malaysia or the Gulf, charging illegal fees, falsifying documents, and exposing migrants to debt bondage and sexual exploitation (Rahman, 2020).

Jessore and Benapole Border

The Benapole land border is a frequent route for irregular cross-border movement into India, often involving trafficked women and children. Networks here are complex, involving transporters, corrupt officials, and document forgers (Kabir & Chowdhury, 2019).

Hotspot Mapping in Malaysia

Klang Valley (Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Seremban)

Malaysia's Klang Valley represents a labour magnet where many undocumented migrants reside. The area is central for SoM and HT, particularly in construction, plantation, and domestic labour sectors (ILO, 2019). Many victims are funnelled into exploitative working conditions with threats of deportation and withheld wages (Hamid, 2019).

Sabah and Sarawak

These eastern states are key nodes in irregular maritime migration from the Philippines and Indonesia. In Sabah, palm oil plantations often employ undocumented workers, some of whom are smuggled or trafficked through Tawau port (UNODC, 2021). Poor infrastructure and weak maritime surveillance amplify the issue.

Northern Border – Perlis and Kedah

The infamous discovery of mass graves in Wang Kelian in 2015 spotlighted this area as a central SoM and HT corridor. Smuggling routes from Thailand traverse dense forests before reaching these border districts, often facilitated by transnational criminal syndicates (Suhakam & Fortify Rights, 2019).

Hotspot Mapping in Indonesia

Medan and North Sumatra

Medan has long been a hub for labour recruitment and trafficking, especially for outbound domestic workers. Women are often funnelled through unscrupulous agencies for placement in Malaysia or the Middle East (ILO, 2019). Victims report physical abuse, contract substitution, and sexual violence.

West Kalimantan and Pontianak

Located near Malaysia's border, Pontianak is a known exit point for undocumented crossings into Sarawak. The lack of legal migration channels fuels this activity. Smugglers often exploit borderland ethnic and kinship ties to facilitate movement (UNODC, 2021).

Jakarta and Batam

Jakarta serves as the nerve centre of illegal recruitment operations, while Batam—close to Singapore—is a transit point for smuggling networks. The presence of large informal labour markets and limited regulatory oversight makes them vulnerable zones (Setiawati, 2020).

Transnational Corridors and Maritime Routes

One of the most significant findings from the ethnographic and historical data analysis is the recurring use of maritime corridors across the Bay of Bengal, Strait of Malacca, and South China Sea. These routes are used for both smuggling and trafficking. The movement is often disguised as irregular migration, but involves coercion, fraud, or debt bondage (IOM, 2020).

- Bay of Bengal Route: From Cox's Bazar to Peninsular Malaysia via Thai waters.
- Strait of Malacca Route: Used for Indonesian labour migration and illicit transport to Malaysia.

- Sulu-Sulawesi Seas: Connecting eastern Malaysia to the Philippines and parts of Indonesia.
- These corridors are managed by sophisticated transnational criminal networks with local facilitators on both ends. The integration of fishing vessels, fake NGOs, and corrupt border officials facilitates undetected movement (UNODC, 2019).

Role of Technology and Social Media

Hotspot activities are now increasingly planned and coordinated online. Social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp are used to recruit, negotiate fees, and share fake job postings. Online marketplaces and encrypted chats have replaced some traditional recruiters, making tracking and prosecution harder (UNODC, 2021). Victims are often unaware that they are being smuggled or trafficked until it is too late.

Mapping Challenges and Data Gaps

There are inherent difficulties in hotspot mapping due to:

- Underreporting: Victims' fear of reprisals or deportation prevents them from seeking help.
- Legal Ambiguities: Overlap between SoM and HT confuses law enforcement.
- Disaggregated Data: Limited sex-, age-, and country-specific breakdowns reduce the usability of national data.
- Dynamic Routes: Routes shift rapidly in response to border enforcement intensity, making real-time mapping challenging.
- Efforts by IOM, UNHCR, and national NGOs have helped to triangulate available data, but hotspot mapping remains a partial endeavour (IOM, 2020; US TIP Report, 2021).

Hotspot mapping across Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia reveals a geographically dispersed yet functionally interconnected network of irregular migration, smuggling, and trafficking routes. Coastal regions, border zones, and industrial hubs are common denominators. The presence of vulnerable populations, insufficient regulation, weak law enforcement, and transnational criminal complicity further entrench these hotspots. Mapping these zones is vital for directing interventions, enhancing surveillance, and supporting regional cooperation.

Region-Wide Hotspot Map: Key Locations & Routes

Based on comprehensive ethnographic data, legal reviews, and hotspot mapping, the following regions have been identified as critical nodes where irregular migration, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking intersect:

Bangladesh

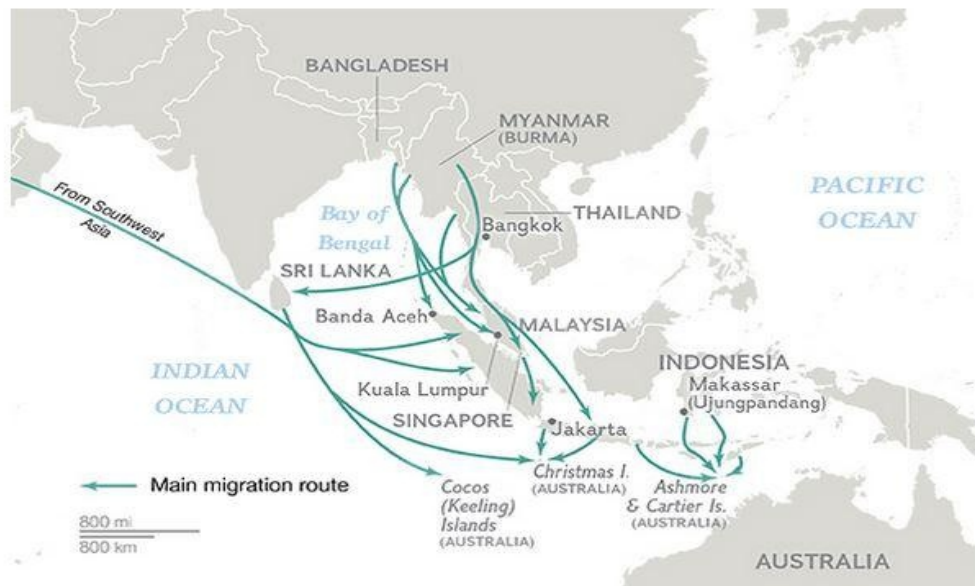
- Cox's Bazar–Teknaf: Coastal launch point, particularly significant for Rohingya maritime departures toward Malaysia or Thailand (UNHCR, 2020; UNODC, 2021).
- Dhaka & Narayanganj: Urban industrial zones where recruitment networks draw from rural migrants, often funnelling them into exploitative labour migration pathways (Rahman, 2020).
- Jessore–Benapole Border: Key land route into India, frequently involves trafficked individuals, especially women and children (Kabir & Chowdhury, 2019).

Malaysia

- Klang Valley (Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Seremban): High concentration of undocumented workers vulnerable to exploitation in construction, domestic work, and plantations (ILO, 2019; Hamid, 2019).
- Sabah & Sarawak: Coastal entry zones connected via sea routes from Indonesia and the Philippines, with limited infrastructure and surveillance (UNODC, 2021).
- Wang Kelian, Perlis–Thailand Border: Site of discovered mass graves (2015) and previously crucial trafficking camps (Suhakam & Fortify Rights, 2019; UNODC, 2021).

Indonesia

- Medan & North Sumatra: Major migrant-sending and recruiting hub, with outbound routes to Malaysia and the Gulf region (ILO, 2019).
- Pontianak & West Kalimantan: Informal crossings into Sarawak; commonly used by local smuggling brokers and ethnic kin networks (Setiawati, 2020; UNODC, 2021).
- Jakarta & Batam: Exploited by smuggling rings as recruiting centres and transit nodes for maritime clandestine departures (Setiawati, 2020).

Southeast Asian Route

NG STAFF

SOURCE: MISSING MIGRANTS PROJECT, INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION

Map Sources & Citations: Migration route and hotspot data aggregated from IOM, UNODC, and national anti-trafficking systems (IOM, 2020; UNODC, 2019); Site-specific hotspot validation drawn from documented field reports and academic studies for Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Rahman, 2020; Hamid, 2019; Setiawati, 2020); Historical data and hotspot shifts, including mass grave sites like Wang Kelian in Malaysia, derive from investigative reports (Suhakam & Fortify Rights, 2019; UNODC, 2021).

Transnational Maritime Routes

- Bay of Bengal Corridor: Cox’s Bazar → Andaman Sea → East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia (IOM, 2020; UNODC, 2019).
- Strait of Malacca Corridor: Routes from Sumatra to Klang Valley or Sabah via fishing trawlers and small boats.
- Sulu-Sulawesi Seas: Movement from Indonesia to Eastern Malaysia and onward transit toward the Philippines or Thai maritime zones.

Map Interpretation & Analytical Summary

- The map underscores coastal zones and borderlands as critically important—places like Cox’s Bazar, Tawau, and Pontianak emerge repeatedly in both ethnographic interviews and hotspot analyses.
- Urban industrial centres (Dhaka, Medan, Klang Valley) serve as nodal points where recruitment collides with exploitation, often involving undocumented migrants trafficked into informal labour markets.
- Smuggling routes are highly adaptive, shifting in response to enforcement busts, climate disruptions, or political crackdowns—demanding flexible surveillance and localised interventions.
- The map highlights gaps in surveillance technology along maritime lanes and at porous land border crossings, indicating that key entry nodes are often outside official monitoring.
- Collaborative migration management between the three countries—including coordinated maritime patrols, shared databases, and hotspot outreach—remains limited but essential for reducing risk.

Usage Guidance

- Policy & Enforcement: Use this map to prioritise areas for increased border monitoring, intelligence sharing, and cross-border task force deployment.
- Humanitarian & Legal Outreach: Direct NGO interventions, legal aid, and survivor-centred services to mapped hotspots where vulnerabilities are highest.
- Data Integration: Encourage consistent data collection and sharing across countries, with standardised definitions and geocoding practices to preserve comparability.
- Adaptive Strategy Building: Recognise routes as dynamic—safe corridors may become high-risk overnight, necessitating flexible response mechanisms in hotspot monitoring.

Progress and Learning Review

This section provides an evaluative overview of the progress, challenges, and lessons learned from state and non-state interventions addressing irregular migration, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia up to 2021. It synthesises findings from policy reviews, program evaluations, and ethnographic insights to assess the effectiveness of legal frameworks, institutional coordination, victim support services, and regional cooperation mechanisms. The final review highlights the evolving nature of governance in response to the complex and dynamic characteristics of migration and trafficking networks.

Progress in Legal and Institutional Frameworks

All three countries have demonstrated legislative advancements in recent years, aligning more closely with international protocols, such as the Palermo Protocols, and regional frameworks, like ASEAN ACTIP (UNODC, 2019). Bangladesh's Human Trafficking Deterrence and Suppression Act (2012) has been amended to enhance enforcement and victim protection. Malaysia's ATIPSOM (2007) has been updated several times, strengthening penalties and expanding the mandate of its Special Task Force on Anti-Smuggling and Trafficking (STF) (US TIP Report, 2021). Indonesia's Law No. 21/2007 remains a crucial legislative tool but has seen growing efforts to improve multi-agency collaboration (Setiawati, 2020).

Institutionally, governments have established or empowered bodies responsible for monitoring and responding to trafficking and smuggling, such as Bangladesh's Anti-Human Trafficking Unit, Malaysia's STF, and Indonesia's National Task Force on the Eradication of Human Trafficking. Inter-ministerial coordination has improved, but bottlenecks remain due to bureaucratic fragmentation and competing priorities (IOM, 2020).

Victim Protection and Rehabilitation

One of the most significant advances relates to the recognition of victim rights and the expansion of protection services. NGOs and international organisations have collaborated with governments to establish shelters, provide psychosocial counselling, and develop reintegration programs. For instance, Malaysia has increased the number of transit shelters and improved referral protocols, while Bangladesh has introduced trafficking victim referral mechanisms linked to police and social welfare departments (Hamid, 2019; Rahman, 2020).

Despite these improvements, gaps remain in victim identification, especially among irregular migrants fearful of deportation or detention. Many victims experience re-trafficking due to limited economic opportunities and inadequate legal safeguards. The COVID-19 pandemic posed additional challenges, with lockdowns limiting access to services and increasing isolation for victims (UNODC, 2021).

Regional Cooperation and Information Sharing

The Bali Process and ASEAN mechanisms have facilitated dialogue and some operational collaboration among Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Information sharing, joint task forces, and capacity-building workshops have increased since 2015. These initiatives helped in disrupting several trafficking syndicates and improving victim repatriation processes (UNODC, 2019).

Nonetheless, political sensitivities and sovereignty concerns have limited deeper cooperation. Data sharing remains inconsistent, and border agencies often prioritise national security over humanitarian considerations (Suhakam & Fortify Rights, 2019). Furthermore, the heterogeneity of legal definitions and enforcement capacity complicates regional harmonisation.

Impact of COVID-19 on Progress and Learning

The pandemic underscored both the resilience and fragility of migration governance systems. Border closures drastically curtailed legal migration channels, increasing reliance on smugglers and traffickers (IOM, 2021). Migrant

workers trapped abroad faced job losses, wage theft, and abuse, while many returnees encountered stigma and inadequate reintegration support (UNODC, 2021).

Governments and NGOs adapted by expanding remote outreach, emergency relief, and information dissemination through digital platforms. For example, in Indonesia, community-based organisations initiated phone counselling for trafficked persons, and Malaysia deployed mobile clinics near hotspots (Setiawati, 2020; Hamid, 2019). These adaptive strategies offer valuable lessons for enhancing crisis responsiveness and migrant-centered approaches.

Lessons Learned and Best Practices

Community Engagement and Awareness: Programs that engage local communities in awareness-raising about the risks of trafficking and irregular migration have proven effective in preventing these issues (Ahsan & Khatun, 2021). Leveraging traditional leadership structures and women's groups fosters trust and early identification of vulnerable individuals.

- **Multi-sectoral Collaboration:** Successful interventions integrate law enforcement, social services, health care, and legal aid. Malaysia's multi-agency task force model is an example, though implementation fidelity varies (US TIP Report, 2021).
- **Data-driven Interventions:** Hotspot mapping and data analytics have improved targeting of resources and enforcement actions. Real-time monitoring and feedback loops with community organisations enhance responsiveness (IOM, 2020).
- **Victim-Centred Approaches:** Emphasising survivor participation in policy design and providing economic empowerment opportunities reduces risks of re-trafficking. Bangladesh's microfinance-linked reintegration programs highlight this approach (Rahman, 2020).
- **Legal and Policy Reforms:** Continuous revision of legal definitions to reflect emerging forms of exploitation, including online recruitment and debt bondage, is essential (Gallagher, 2010).

Remaining Challenges

Despite progress, several challenges persist:

- **Underreporting and Data Gaps:** Stigma, fear, and distrust of authorities limit reporting, resulting in incomplete data on the prevalence of trafficking (UNODC, 2021).
- **Enforcement Limitations:** Corruption, limited training, and resource constraints impede law enforcement effectiveness.
- **Victim Protection:** Gaps in shelter capacity, healthcare access, and legal assistance undermine comprehensive support.
- **Cross-border Coordination:** Political will to engage in sustained regional operations remains uneven.
- **Addressing Root Causes:** Poverty, gender inequality, and lack of legal migration pathways continue to drive vulnerability.

Recommendations for Future Action

- Enhance legal harmonisation among the three countries to standardise definitions, penalties, and victim protections.
- Strengthen cross-border cooperation with formal data-sharing agreements and joint operational protocols.
- Expand victim services, particularly in rural and transit areas, integrating psychosocial care with livelihood programs.
- Invest in technology to monitor trafficking networks, utilising AI and big data analytics.
- Prioritise migrant voices in policy and program design to ensure responsive and contextually appropriate interventions.
- Build resilience for crisis response based on lessons from COVID-19, including remote service delivery and emergency preparedness.

The final review reveals that while Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia have made noteworthy strides in legislation, institutional capacity, and victim support, the complexity and adaptability of trafficking and smuggling networks require ongoing, coordinated, and innovative responses. A holistic approach that integrates legal reforms, community engagement, regional cooperation, and technology is critical for safeguarding migrant rights and dismantling criminal enterprises. The insights gained from this review provide a foundation for refining policy and taking action in the years ahead.

Conclusion

This trilateral research has provided an in-depth analysis of irregular migration, smuggling of migrants, and human trafficking between Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Employing a historical and ethnographic methodology, combined with legal reviews and geospatial mapping, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the socio-political and institutional dimensions of migration governance in the region.

The legal review revealed that, although all three countries have ratified international instruments, such as the Palermo Protocol, and adopted national laws addressing trafficking and smuggling, significant discrepancies persist in enforcement, victim protection, and definitional clarity (UNODC, 2021; IOM, 2020). These gaps weaken cross-border cooperation and allow criminal networks to exploit inconsistencies in legal regimes.

Hotspot mapping revealed key transit and destination points—such as Cox’s Bazar, Medan, and Penang—that serve as critical nodes in regional trafficking and smuggling routes. These hotspots, often characterised by weak surveillance and socio-economic vulnerabilities, highlight the urgent need for coordinated border management, intelligence sharing, and local-level interventions (Setiawati, 2020; Hamid, 2019).

The endline progress and learning review identified notable strides in awareness campaigns, regional dialogues, and victim support services. However, challenges remain in terms of funding, political will, and bureaucratic inertia. Community-based initiatives and survivor-centred programming have shown promise but require greater institutional support (Farzana, 2015; US TIP Report, 2021).

In conclusion, a more harmonised, human-rights-focused, and evidence-driven regional strategy is essential to effectively address the root causes and manifestations of irregular migration and human trafficking. The study recommends strengthening trilateral legal cooperation, investing in early warning systems, and empowering frontline actors with training and resources to protect vulnerable populations. Only through sustained collaboration can the region hope to mitigate the systemic risks and humanitarian consequences associated with irregular migration and human trafficking.

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